Jackson Hits Ineptness In Drug-Agent Case

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Agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration, participating in a marijuana seizure Tuesday in Colombia, were caught in a gun battle that resulted from faulty coordination, Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.) charged yesterday.

A spokesman for DEA confirmed the incident but challenged several points in Jackson's description, which was contained in a letter the senator sent to Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger yesterday.

According to Jackson's account, DEA agents, "accompanied by Colombian customs officials" chartered a plane and flew to an isolated place 180 miles south of Bogota in an attempt to seize 23,000 pounds of marijuana.

"They had apparently not coordinated this operation with the Colombian federal police, which, as I understand it, has primary authority for the enforcement of narcotics laws in Colombia," Jackson wrote.

Jackson said the Columbian federal police already has surrounded the spot where the marijuana was hidden in order to arrest the drug traffickers when they arrived.

"According to my information, the aircraft, carrying the DEA agents and Colombian customs officials, landed in the area, spotted the cache, approached it and were thereafter engaged in a fierce gun battle of one hour duration with the Colombian federal police. Notwithstanding the fact that the plane was riddled with bullets, the DEA agents and Colombian customs officials managed to escape and fly back to Bogota," Jackson said. No one was injured, according to DEA and the State Department.

When the plane landed in Bogota, Jackson said, the commanding general of the Colombian federal police "who immediately seized the aircraft and technically placed under arrest" the DEA agents and the Colombian customs officials.

Jackson, a declared candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1976, is chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations which is investigating DEA activities in the United States and abroad. Jackson said in his letter to Kissinger that the incident "casts grave doubt on the methods and operations of DEA abroad."

A DEA spokesman, Robert H. Feldkamp, stressed that the two DEA agents involved in the incident were participating at the request of Colombian authorities and that the two agents fired no shots during the gun battle.

"I can't stress too strongly that it was a Colombian operation that we were assisting," Feldkamp said. "DEA does not operate anywhere unilaterally outside the United States."

Feldkamp said that, from DEA's standpoint, it was "routine" for its agents to join a "host country" operation when invited. "We do this all over the world. We render technical assistance at their invitation," Feldkamp said.

A considerable amount of drugs move "in and through" Colombia, according to Feldkamp. Coordination between DEA and other countries is important in stemming the flow of illegal drugs into the United States. DEA has agents in approximately 40 countries, according to Feldkamp.

Feldkamp said that "there conceivably could have a been a mix-up between their own (Colombian) agencies. There was no mix-up as far as we were concerned."

The gun battle was not "fierce," as Jackson described it, Feldkamp said, and the entire incident was "not nearly as dramatic as the letter would portray it." The mistake was realized on the scene, according to Feldkamp, and the DEA agents were present to witness the burning of the marijuana.

When the DEA agents returned to Bogota, he said, they were questioned at the airport by Colombian federal police but were not arrested, Feldkamp said.

No protest or complaint has been filed by the Colombian government as a result of the incident, Feldkamp said. "There's been a lot of discussion of it in Bogota among our people, them and the embassy. It's been ironed out," Feldkamp said. "We expect to stay in Colombia as we have."

Jackson, who has been conducting closed hearings on DEA, is expected to have at least one public session in about two weeks. A staff source said the Colombian incident would be investigated further by the subcommittee.